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Ocoee: among the lakes and truck fields of Orange County.

Orange County Chamber of Commerce

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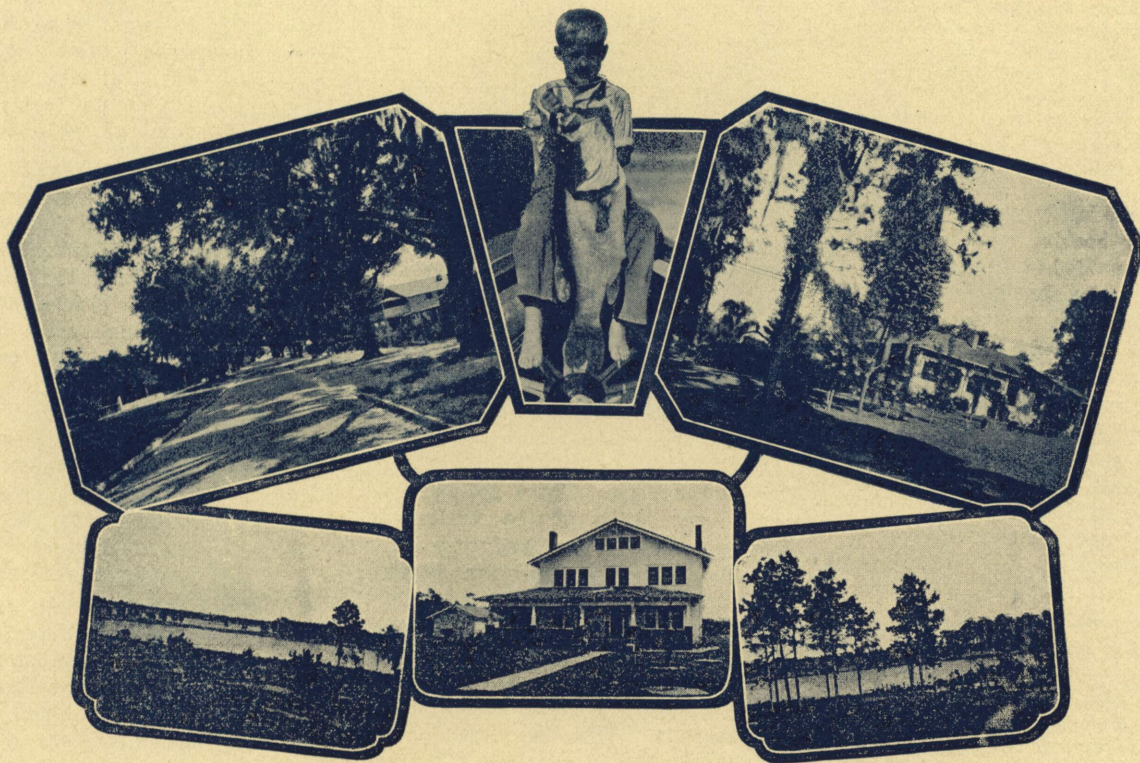
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Ocoee

Among the Lakes and Truck Fields of Orange County, Florida.



1. On beautiful shaded Oakland Ave. 2 Even small boys catch big ones here. 3. An attractive home amidst lovely surroundings. 4. Some of Ocoee's lovely lakes. 5. Another fine home.
6. View from the Flewelling home across the lake.

Published by the Orange County Chamber of Commerce, Orlando, Orange County, Florida.

OCOEE

Among the Lakes and Truck Fields of Orange County, Florida.

BY Wm. P. BLAKELY, A. M. CLARK and T. C. HAWTHORNE.

"On the banks of Lake Prima Vista and Starke Lake lies this newly platted town of Ocoee. Nature has done all that is possible to do for a place. For twenty years past the hand of civilization has been at work in the wilderness, hewing down the forest and planting out trees. Here vegetation thrives all winter. Gardens of many acres blush to scarlet with fine tomatoes, or are green with cabbage, cauliflower, beans, and peas."

Thus reads, in part, the introduction to a booklet on "The Town of Ocoee," published in 1885 by the South Apopka Land and Improvement Company, represented by a group of men who had a vital part in laying the foundation of the substantial and prosperous little city of Ocoee of today. Interesting from cover to cover, well printed, and altogether attractive this little booklet might well be applied to the city of Ocoee of today, with a few deletions. Parts of other paragraphs present an alluring and wholly truthful word picture of the Ocoee community, as follows:

"This is a region of lakes, lakes with beautiful shores and clear waters, filled with fish that rarely, if ever, shun the angler's hook. The soil is underlaid with clay, and the well water is usually good. Property is cheap and the opportunity for investment excellent—Last year, 1884, there were shipped from this section 20,000 crates of vegetables by steamer over Lake Apopka, and by wagon to Orlando."

Here the booklet describes the coming of the railroad, which is predicted to be completed and in operation by January 1, 1886. The booklet closes with a statement of the opportunities in Ocoee:

"Business of various kinds will find a good opening. We

have one general store and one grocery, with Post Office. Groves on which not a cent has ever been spent for commercial fertilizers, stand green and glossy with their loads of golden fruit.

"Look this country over well before going elsewhere and if you don't like it, 'The world is all before you where to choose.' But nine out of ten will like it and will buy and build here."

The initiative and enterprise of those people of Ocoee forty years ago has brought about the beautiful, modern, and progressive little city of today. The railroads came; the fertile lands described were cleared, business houses were built, and the faith kept.

Years before these beginnings ambitious predictions were made by settlers who came immediately after the Civil War, a foundation had been laid for a town. These settlers had dared the perils of the wilderness, cleared small areas, and tested the productivity of the soil for vegetables and oranges by experimentation. They found the soil wholly adaptable for this purpose. To the east some 10 miles a larger community was in the process of growing steadily and successfully. This was Orlando, and the larger center provided a market and outlet for the surplus crops.

Originally "Starke Lake"

For many years the community was known as "Starke Lake." Among those who visioned a bigger and a more complete community was Captain B. M. Sims who came to this community shortly after the Civil War. Others who came later were Dr. H. K. Clarke, and Charles J. Chun. To these may be added R. B. F. Roper who came to West Orange County with his father and family several years before the Civil War. These three men, Clarke,

Roper, and Chun, organized a real estate company, and were responsible for the platting of the town in 1886. The name of the community was changed from Starke Lake to Ocoee. This name means "no cold." It was suggested by Capt. Sims, who came originally from Tennessee, and who, as a boy, loved a small river by that name.

Orange Groves Planted

The Sims, Ropers, and Danns, were among the leading families of the early pioneer days. Capt. B. M. Sims discovered sour orange trees in the hammocks along the shores of Lake Apopka. He cleared land and planted these orange trees in rows. Parts of these original groves are still productive. The exact age of these trees is not known. It is of record that these families were the first to produce vegetables on a commercial scale, and among them Capt. B. M. Sims took the leading part. He secured the Post Office and was active in the direction of the community expansion.

The Political Center

The Starke Lake community was the center of a wide scattered territory. Killarney, Oakland, Gotha, and other settlements for miles around made this settlement their immediate social and business center. Politically, the Dann school house was the point of contact, for this was made the sole voting precinct.

The Arrival of Capt. B. M. Sims

The coming of Capt. B. M. Sims to the community immediately after the Civil War is one of the high lights in the history of these early days. He rode into Florida on horse back from his native state of Tennessee. This horse was one that Capt. Sims had ridden in the Civil War, as an officer in the Confederate army. Attracted by the stories

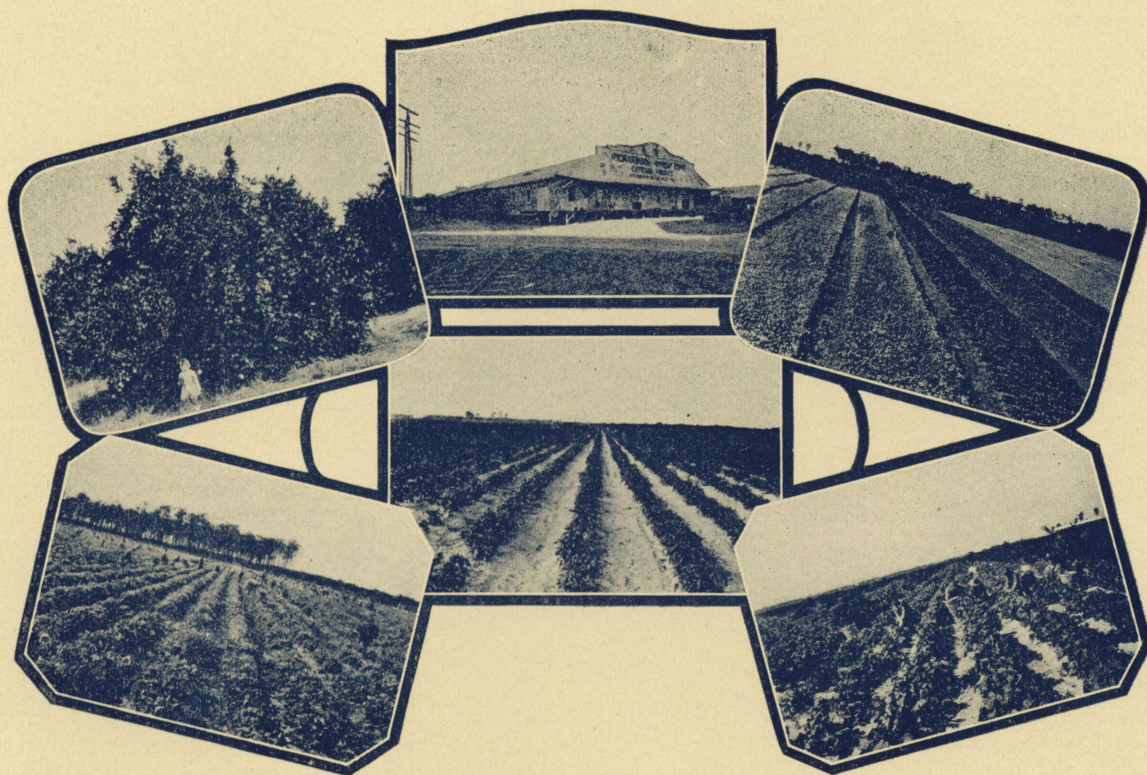
of opportunity in far away Florida, this young officer spent months looking for a place in which to locate. He finally chose the Ocoee section because of its beauty, its most favorable year-around climate, and the tremendous potentialities of its soil. Capt. Sims died at the advanced age of 93 years, on Sept. 1, 1928, surrounded by those who loved and honored him, and amid scenes that many eventful years had endeared to him.

man who was Ocoee's merchant prince for several years. Mr. Freeman sold out to T. J. Minor & Bro. About this time Wm. Tyler opened a store and Dr. R. J. Bigelow a drug store. These merchants operated for years. When the Farmers Alliance was organized, the farmers established a store in Ocoee, after a few years this store went on the rocks, when John Hughey, the old time merchant, bought the wreck and established a new store. Then George P. Brannon and Bro., bought out

now are at the financial helm.

Railroads

With the building of the Florida Midland Railroad in 1886, the rapid growth began. Many new settlers came in, large areas were cleared, vegetable farms were opened up, orange and grapefruit groves were planted, the transportation facilities became such that new and wider markets were made available. Within a few years other and neighboring communities experiencing a similar



Top pictures, left to right. An 18 months old child by a 13 year old orange tree.

2 One of the citrus packing houses. 3 Lettuce seed bed.

Bottom row, left to right, are three typical truck fields and crops in the Ocoee section.

The First Store

The commercial life of Ocoee (then Starke Lake) began in 1880 when John Hughey opened a general store. Mr. Hughey continued in the mercantile business for a few years, but handling the big checks brought in by his customers, who were principally fruit and vegetable growers, lured him into the trucking business. The store changed hands several times in rapid succession, finally coming into the hands of J. T. Free-

Hughey, Hughey bought back again, and Wm. P. Blakely, a young man from Nashville, Tenn., who had been teaching the Ocoee school for twelve years, bought the Hughey store and continued to operate it for twenty-five years, selling out to Mr. Rewis when the Florida big boom was at its peak. None of the old time merchants are in business in Ocoee. New men and new methods rendered necessary by modern innovations,

growth, demanded improved highways. While the hard surfaced road did not come until many years later, the old sand trails were improved, and made comfortable and passable for wagons and buggies of that day. The railroads furnishing better transportation facilities, were the principal cause of abandoning the staple crops of corn, cotton, sweet potatoes, etc., for the planting of citrus groves, and vegetables for the

winter market of the north. After the Atlantic Coast Line R. R. acquired the Florida Midland R. R. the Seaboard Air Line R. R. seeing the importance of Ocoee as a shipping point built into the town, so that now we are served by both these great systems.

The Hard-surfaced Roads

The modern era of Ocoee begins with the building of hard-surfaced roads. During the past ten years a rapid expansion has taken place. Many new business houses have been built, streets have been paved, residential sections have been laid out, beautified, and made thoroughly modern. Hard surfaced roads radiate in every direction. Large packing plants for fruits and vegetables are served by these roads and by both the Atlantic Coast Line R. R. and the Seaboard Air Line R. R., transporting these products to all parts of the United States and Canada. Orlando ten miles away, furnishes a good local market for poultry eggs, and vegetables.

Incorporated as a City

Ocoee was not incorporated as a city until 1923. As a full fledged little Central Florida city, the spirit of her people assures a brilliant future. The water in Ocoee comes from deep wells; the light and power from a great Florida distributing organization. The Ocoee schools embracing the elementary grades, junior high, and teacher training schools are second to none outside of the large cities. The churches are fairly well attended. Starke Lake, Lake Prima Vista, and Lake Olympia, each joins the other, and adds to the beauty of the place, besides providing recrea-

tion and health to the citizenship. Lake Apopka, the second largest lake in Florida is three miles away in two directions over hard surfaced roads.

Water Transportation

In the early days when vegetables and fruits were first produced commercially, Lake Apopka bore the traffic of thousands of car loads of produce. These shipments by water



found their way through a chain of lakes to the St. Johns River, and thence to Jacksonville and the Atlantic ocean. Railroads and hard-surfaced roads competing against the slower water transportation eliminated the lake boats. Recent years have revived plans for once again establishing a more complete inland water system. When this is developed Ocoee will become practically a lake port, and will receive the full benefits of such rates as shall be established as a result.

Famous Truck Farms

The truck farms of the Ocoee section are among the most productive in the world, lettuce, peppers, beans, egg-plants, tomatoes, bulbs and other valuable produce are

grown during the winter months. Hundreds of thousands of homes in the frozen north are supplied by the Ocoee truck farms during the months from November to March. The summer months produce corn and other forage crops for home consumption. Poultry raising and some dairying are industries that each year increase materially.

Acres To Be Developed

While large areas are developed into truck farms and orange and grapefruit groves, yet many times the acreage under cultivation, just as fertile and productive await clearing and planting. Herein lies the potential wealth and possibilities of the Ocoee section. Interest in the development of poultry farms is increasing in the same proportion with other sections of Orange County, and the immediate future will bring added wealth to the community, from this enterprise.

Proximity to Orlando

Because of Ocoee's proximity to Orlando, it will become more and more a home-city for those who seek to get away from the large city. Twenty minutes by motor suffices to reach Orlando. The lakes, the general attractiveness of palms and evergreen oaks, the modern municipal facilities, together with the hospitality of her citizenry will bring the community new families every year.

Ocoee's history is one of steady growth since Captain Sims and others first ventured to clear the lands and build a settlement. Sacrifices, some hardships, a few failures, but a great deal of success and happiness and prosperity, has created the Ocoee of today. The Ocoee of tomorrow is assured.